

GROUP VISITS MONTANA TO DISCUSS GEOTHERMAL ENERGY POTENTIAL

By The Associated Press

HELENA, Mont. (AP) - Geothermal power is a clean, abundant source of energy that has "real potential" in Montana, U.S. Sen. Jon Tester said.

This weekend, Tester hosted a delegation of business and government leaders from Iceland, a world leader in geothermal energy production.

The two-day visit to Montana included meetings with alternative energy developers and lawmakers as well as a tour of a geothermal test well near Marysville. On Sunday, the group traveled to Butte for meetings at Montana Tech and a tour of another potential geothermal energy development site, the Bell Diamond head frame.

"We have done some things with geothermal in this country," Tester said.

"Unfortunately, we haven't done enough, and I think Iceland can help push us in that direction. They've already done it, so it takes away some of the risk."

Iceland, an island nation in the North Atlantic, has a population of about 300,000 in an area roughly the size of Ohio. The country decided to make an effort toward energy independence after the oil crisis of the early 1970s.

"The Icelandic government said, 'We are not going to be dependent on foreign oil,'" said Hlynur Gudjonsson, trade commissioner for North America in the Icelandic Consulate in New York. "It was having a serious effect on our economy."

Today, Iceland heats 87 percent of its homes and generates more than half of its electricity with geothermal energy.

Moving toward energy independence helped diversify Iceland's economy, Gudjonsson said. Once primarily reliant on fishing, the country moved through a manufacturing phase and into tourism and financial services, he said.

Iceland appears to have the technology and the capital necessary to finance geothermal projects around the world, and Tester said potential investment opportunities were part of this weekend's talks.

It will be up to the private sector to make things happen, but the interest is there, he said.

Tester said geothermal power is being used in California and Nevada. But many other

states, including Montana, have the geography necessary to tap the hot water beneath the surface.

Jeff Birkby of the National Center for Appropriate Technology in Butte said eastern Montana's thermal features are different from those in the west.

Western Montana features lots of hot springs and fault-controlled systems where water descends into the earth, becomes heated and rises back to the surface, he said. Eastern Montana is home to the Madison Aquifer, an extremely deep underground reservoir with high-temperature water that might be accessible through abandoned oil and gas wells.

"We think there's a lot of potential for electricity generation from those wells," he said.